

Nicolas Oikonomides

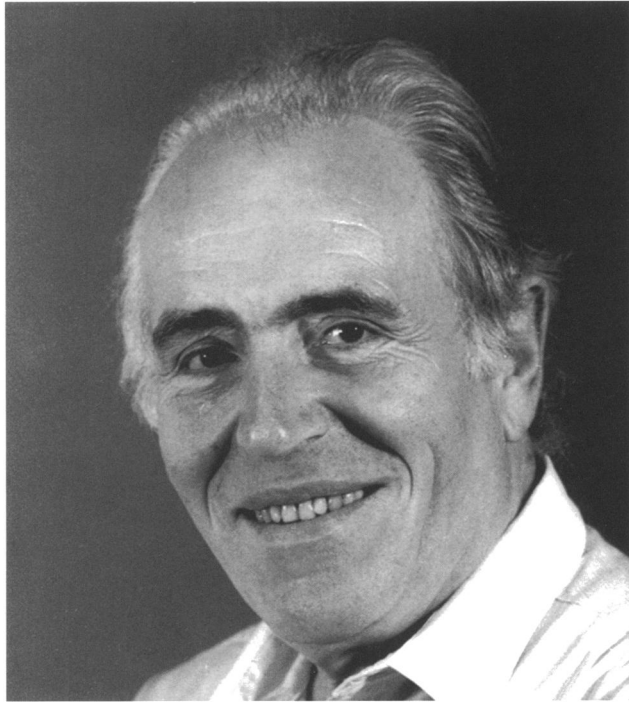
1934–2000

Dumbarton Oaks has lost a good friend. On 31 May 2000, Nicolas Oikonomides, Dumbarton Oaks's advisor for Byzantine sigillography, died in Athens after a brief illness.

The beginning of Professor Oikonomides' long association with Dumbarton Oaks dates to 1973, the year he commenced a project to read and publish the 17,000 Byzantine lead seals in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks and the Fogg Museum.

In many ways Professor Oikonomides was uniquely qualified to head the project and to edit the first four volumes of the *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art*, a series devoted to seals of the Byzantine provincial administration. Although as a youth he had originally intended to study the history of modern Greece at the University of Athens, Oikonomides soon turned to Byzantine history under the tutelage of Professor Dionysios Zakynthinos, and his first writings in this discipline began to appear in the early 1950s. In 1958 he enrolled in a doctoral program in Paris, where he studied sigillography with one of the great specialists in the discipline, Père Vitalien Laurent. His dissertation, an edition and commentary of the Taktikon Escorial, was the basis of a later volume, published in 1972, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles*. This book was then and remains a classic study of the evolution of titles and developments in the Byzantine system of administration. For almost two decades Professor Oikonomides maintained an association with French byzantinology, collaborating in the publication of seven volumes of the Archives de l'Athos series, beginning with the *Actes de Dionysiou* (1968) and continuing through the appearance of the fourth volume, *Actes d'Iviron* (1995).

The colonels' seizure of power in Greece in 1967 forced Professor Oikonomides to leave the country and to continue his career elsewhere. Eventually, in 1969, he settled in Canada, where he took a position in the history department at the University of Montreal. For an expatriate Greek with extensive academic training in France, francophone Montreal, with its large Hellenic community, was the perfect place to make the transition from Europe to North America. As he established himself at the university where he would remain for twenty years and twice serve as department chairman, Oikonomides continued to stay abreast of events in Greece and to maintain his contacts with Greeks abroad, not least through his broadcasting on Greek-language radio. Yet devoted as he was to his native land and culture, Oikonomides came to feel very much at home in Montreal and became a Canadian citizen, an allegiance of which he was also very proud.



At a reception commemorating his retirement from the University of Montreal in 1989, his colleagues and students paid homage to his contribution in teaching and research. He taught undergraduate courses and seminars in both Byzantine and modern Greek history while training and supervising a succession of graduate students. He was a practical, approachable teacher who believed that one learned by doing; he would lay out photographs of manuscripts or seals and have the student begin reading them to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. While he insisted on high standards in the quantity and quality of research, above all in the primary sources, his guidance was always instructive and unobtrusive. It was, however, the wealth of his scholarly research and publications that truly set him apart, an achievement attributable not only to his extraordinary range of expertise, but also to his industry and use of time. When his successor as chairman expressed astonishment that Oikonomides had been so productive even when burdened with all manner of administrative responsibilities, it brought to mind Oikonomides once mentioning how he had transcribed a number of Athonite documents during plane trips between Montreal and Toronto (where he had been invited to give a seminar on Byzantine diplomatics).

Professor Oikonomides was well versed in palaeography, and a good portion of his scholarly output reflects an abiding interest in using this tool to exploit unedited documents for information on legal precepts, the duties of bureaucrats, and the evolution of bureaucratic structures. Dumbarton Oaks drew on his expertise in these areas in the 1980s, when he became a key member of the team that produced the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, serving on the Advisory Board and writing all the entries on Byzantine diplomacy, diplomatics, and the fiscal system.

Under Laurent's early guidance, he had developed a further research skill: sigillography. It is possible that he would never have developed such mastery of this auxiliary discipline except for the conjunction of several unrelated circumstances. In 1969 Professor Herbert Hunger, while a visiting scholar at Dumbarton Oaks, had the opportunity to view the collection of some 12,000 Byzantine lead seals that Dumbarton Oaks had assembled and recommended that the institution undertake publishing them. Such a venture required a competent editor. With a trained sigillographer on the North American continent, the stage was set for Professor Oikonomides and Dumbarton Oaks to enter into a long-term arrangement whereby he served (from 1972 until his death) as advisor for Byzantine sigillography.

The first phase of the project was an arduous one. It consisted of reading the 12,000 seals of the Dumbarton Oaks collection, in addition to the 5,000 more from the collection of the Fogg Museum of Art, and entering the transcriptions on note cards.¹ By late 1979 the reading of the seals had been completed, and there was now lodged in the Dumbarton Oaks basement a vast "cartoteca" of seals. After an eight-year hiatus, the seals project was reborn in 1987 as a publications project. Professor Oikonomides rose to the challenge

¹One memory of this time that shall always remain with me (John Nesbitt) is a query of Professor Oikonomides as to where and how I should begin my portion of the work on the seals. I had, after all, never seen a lead seal in my life and, like most people, had no idea how to read one. He said that I should begin with the monogrammatic seals; if I could read those, I could read any of them. In the end, this was not true, for there are still many seals that elude my comprehension. Indeed, the fact that I can read and interpret any of them is really due to his patient guidance and the vast knowledge that he brought to our task.

of bridging the gap between archive and dissemination in a way that few others would have. He realized that to publish them would require the use of new technology—the computer.

If there was one area of expertise in which Professor Oikonomides openly delighted, it was his mastery of the intricacies of “MacWorld,” and one of his proudest achievements was the creation (with the help of Harvard technicians) of Sealshort, an inscriptional font. With this new font in hand it was possible to publish camera-ready copy, that is, catalogues that could be produced rapidly, accurately, and inexpensively. The question then became what to publish. The answer was relatively easy. For two decades Professor Oikonomides had been researching and publishing articles on changes in the provincial administration and the history of the Byzantine frontiers. The time had come to build upon such articles as “L’évolution de l’organisation administrative de l’Empire byzantin au XI^e siècle (1025–1118)”² and to publish seals relevant to historical geography and the functions and personnel of provincial bureaucracies. The energy that Professor Oikonomides brought to the accomplishment of this project (as well as others) is reflected in the fact that volume one appeared in 1991, and volume four will appear in 2001—a publication rate of almost one volume every two and a half years.

This figure is of course exclusive of the many other seals publications in which he and Dumbarton Oaks were involved and of which he was either author or editor. To minimize discussion in the catalogues of how and why seals are assigned certain dates, Professor Oikonomides had the foresight to publish a booklet on these matters in 1986, *Dated Lead Seals*. To encourage the study of seals and their publication, in 1987 he initiated *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography*, a journal that soon became a means of overcoming one of the major stumbling blocks to the publication of seals, namely, bibliography. The proper cataloguing of seals requires information from many publications, including auction sales, on the existence of similar or parallel specimens. Addressing this issue, volume three (1993), volume five (1998), and volume six (1999) include lists of scholarly articles and auction catalogues appearing between the years 1931 and 1996.

All of this Professor Oikonomides undertook while handling the competing needs of his home institutions in Greece. For shortly after the seals project was restarted (in 1987), he left North America to take the chair of Byzantine History at the University of Athens. Later he also took over direction of the Byzantine Studies Center at the National Hellenic Research Foundation, and in 1997 he became vice-president of the Executive Committee of the Foundation for Hellenic Culture. His scholarly production remained as rich as ever amidst these duties, and in 1996 he realized his longstanding intention to publish the definitive study of the middle Byzantine fiscal system, *Fiscalité et exemption à Byzance (IX^e–X^es.)*.

Nicolas Oikonomides’ scholarly reputation is assured, for his work will long be indispensable to research in every aspect of Byzantine history, but his friends and colleagues will remember him most of all for the pleasure of his company. He was a convivial, generous host with a ready sense of humor who loved to speak of his travels, experiences, and observations. Perhaps our most affectionate memory of Nikos will be the story of his rendezvous with U.S. customs officials. En route from Montreal to Washington, he pre-

²TM 6 (1976).

sented his visa for admission to the United States. When asked to explain his role with the “seals project,” Nikos responded that Dumbarton Oaks, a major research center, had come into possession of 17,000 seals, of which he was preparing a catalogue. As customs officials gathered round in amazement, Nikos warmed to the subject, explaining that the seals had come from various lands, principally Turkey and Greece; each one had been photographed, and now it was time to discuss the provenance and owners of the seals in a multivolume catalogue. It finally dawned on Nikos, as he beheld the incredulous faces before him, that the officials thought that he was talking about 17,000 marine mammals stored on an estate in the national capital. He then hastened to explain the meaning of “seal” in this particular context, but the lesson Nikos derived from this incident was that the United States truly was the greatest country on earth, for only Americans had the breadth of mind not just to envision but to support such a “seals catalogue.”

We thought it appropriate to close with the following lines from Cavafy, which we offer in tribute to a great scholar who did so much to illuminate the history, institutions, and civilization of the medieval Greek world:

Υπήρξε δίκαιος, σοφός, γενναῖος
 Υπήρξεν ἔτι τὸ ἄριστον ἐκεῖνο, Ἑλληνικός—
 ἰδιότητα δὲν ἔχ' ἢ ἀνθρωπότης τιμιότεραν·
 εἰς τοὺς θεοὺς εὐρίσκονται τὰ πέραν.

*Il était juste, sage, et courageux
 Et en fin Grec, plus que toute autre chose;
 L'humanité ne s'honore pas de plus belle qualité
 De meilleures ne se recontrent que parmi les dieux.*

*He was just, wise, courageous
 And he was moreover that best of all, a Greek—
 Humanity has no more honorable quality;
 The ones beyond are found among the gods.*

John Nesbitt
 Eric McGeer